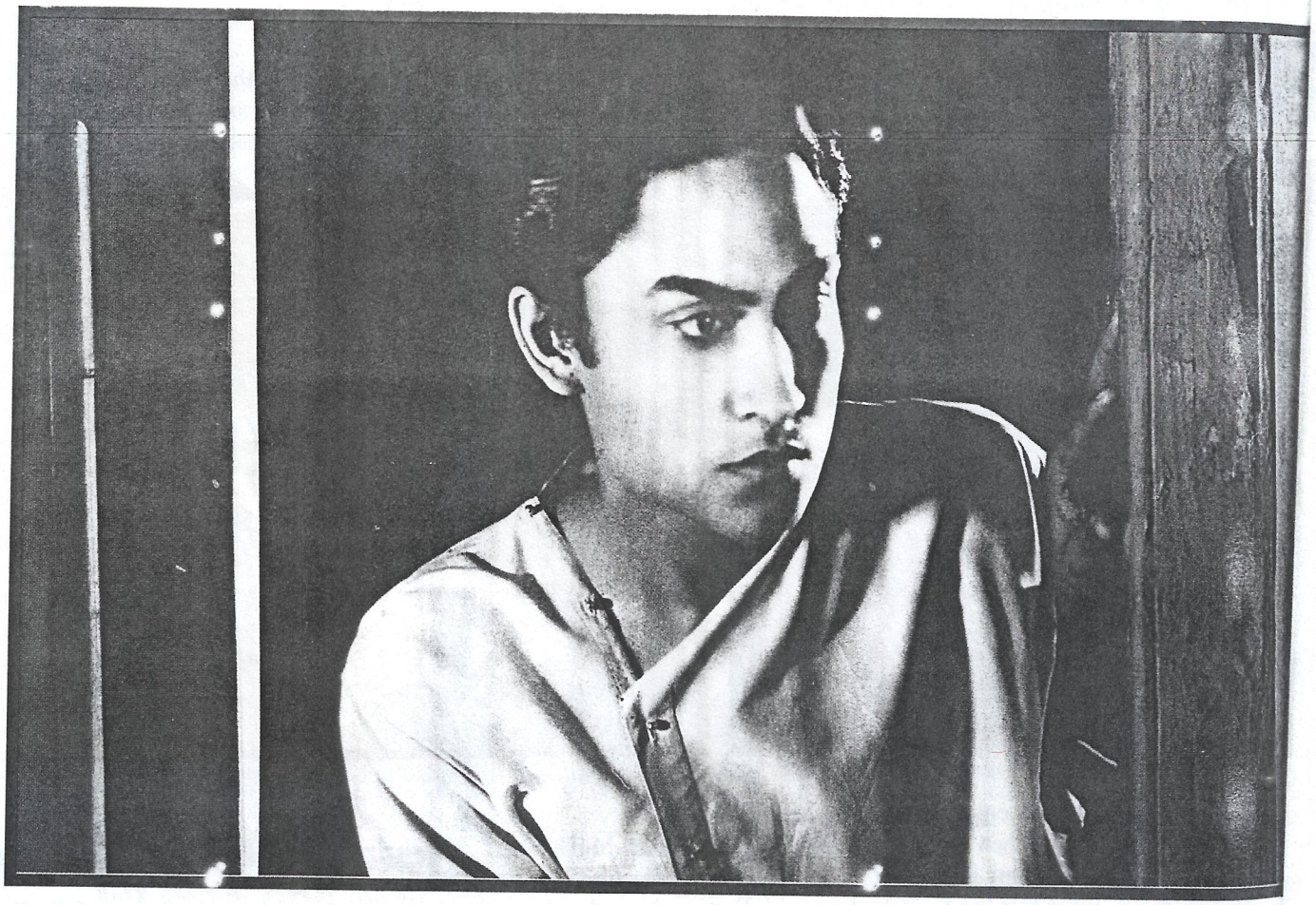
REMEMBER THE TIME

HOME ALONE: ASHOK KUMAR



Devika Rani smiles down from the wall. Kishore Kumar laughs from another portrait. Himanshu Rai's statuette sits serenely on the shelf. Memories of another day pervade the air. So does silence.

Nostalgia engulfs me as I walk into his room. A very frail-looking Ashok Kumar sits amidst oxygen cylinders and trays stacked with medicines. He's perceptibly weaker than the last time I met him... a year ago. The eyes have sunken further, so have the cheeks.

He smiles weakly. "What else do you expect of a 90-year-old man? I'm suffering from various ailments but age is the main culprit. For years I fought

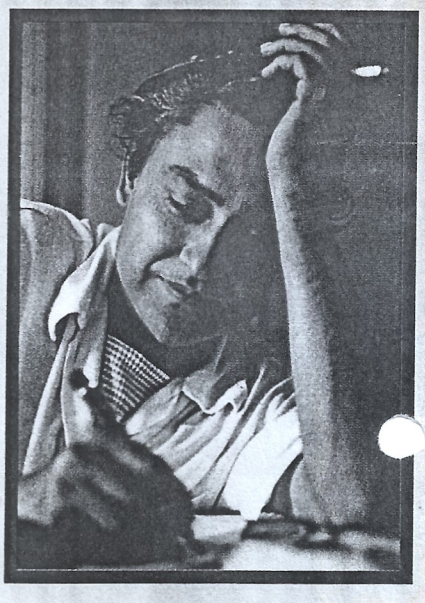
asthma, but I've given up now. I know my end is near. It's imminent. I'm just waiting for it."

Wiping his glasses, he tells me of the time when he was hospitalised at Jaslok for four months. He mumbles, "The doctors had given up on me. They gave me just 24 hours. I don't remember those days. But I'm told that when I heard his words, I went after the doctor and punched him hard on the nose. He was knocked out. I don't know where I summoned that kind of energy from, the hospital staff had to restrain me with injections."

Bemused, he tells me, "I'm told I only spoke in Bengali at the hospital. And that I kept referring to some war that was going on. I don't know what happened to me. But I survived it all. Strangely, I don't remember a thing today."

Dadamoni lives alone in his Chembur bungalow with only his nurse-cum-maid Dolly and secretary Kurshid Ahmed for company. His voice drops an octave as he narrates, "My daughter Preeti visits me daily. I'm comfortable but I'm cut off from the film industry. Earlier, industry folk would call me with film offers. But I can't even walk two steps without support... so where's the question of acting anymore?" His last film appearance was in Shakti Samanta's *Ankhon Mein Tum Ho*.

Sighs he, "All my friends have passed away. I'm all alone. But people from the industry do call me from time to time. Sunil Dutt, Amrish Puri, Hrishikesh Mukherjee and Shakti Samanta do keep in touch. The other day Amitabh Bachchan came to visit me. He often calls to enquire after my health."



Just then the phone rings. It's Hrishikesh Mukherjee. Dadamoni is amused when Hrishi*da* tells him that he loves him the most in the world. Putting down the phone, he laughs, "Hrishikesh is such a dear man. He was my assistant at Bombay Talkies."

Franz Osten took one look at me and said I'd never make it as an actor

His thoughts stray to the sepia days. He rewinds, "Imagine, I never ever wanted to become an actor. I came to Bombay to become a director. Those days, actors were really looked down upon. It was said that actors come from the lowest strata of society. So I joined the camera department of Bombay Talkies. Later, I was made a lab assistant."

Dadamoni became an actor by fluke. Apparently, the leading man of *Jeevan Naiyya* had fallen ill. "Himanshu Rai pleaded with me to step in," Dadamoni says. "He would have lost a huge amount of money as his set was ready. I said I wasn't interested. But he

wouldn't take no for an answer. Ultimately, I relented. But the German director, Franz Osten, took one look at me and said I'd never make it as an actor.

"I was indignant. I yelled at him saying that I didn't want to become an actor. After all, only pimps and prostitutes became actors. Surprisingly, Himanshu had great faith in my abilities. Even though I was determined that I wouldn't act in any more films, Himanshu convinced me to do *Achhut Kanya.*"

After *Achhut Kanya* became a hit, there was no looking back. Movies like *Izzat, Savitri, Prem Kahani* and *Janambhoomi* brought him more fame and glory. He reminisces, "When I was given a salary of Rs 150, I was so excited ...I didn't know what to do with so much money. I didn't even know where to keep it. So I tore open my pillow and stuffed the money in it."

His rise to fame rattled his parents though. He grins, "My mother was certain that I'd fall into bad ways after joining movies. So without letting me know, she arranged my marriage. I didn't even see my wife before the wedding. In those days, the bride and the groom never met each other."

Shobha died craving my love. I kissed her face... Her eyes closed after that

His eyes stray to his late wife's photograph on the wall. He recalls, "We lived together for 50 years. I loved her very much. But ours wasn't really a happy marriage. Mainly because Shobha started drinking heavily. I tolerated her for a while. But then my patience ran out. Each evening, I'd come home to find her sozzled. She couldn't even serve me dinner or talk to me properly. Those days we used to live at Kala Ghoda. Since I was fed up with her, I brought this plot in Chembur and built the bungalow in instalments. I then shifted here."

He rewinds, "We stayed separately for a while. But then she followed me here. She apologised and promised to give up drinking. But she could never do it. It was sad because I tried my best to help her."

His wife died just two days before their 50th wedding anniversary. "She was in the hospital for quite some time," he recalls. "She was keen to celebrate our golden wedding anniversary. We'd called over all our friends and relatives. But two days before the party, she passed away. When I went to see her for the last time, her eyes were half open. I was told that the eyes remain open when a person's wishes remain unfulfilled. I knew she'd died craving my love. I kissed her face. And strangely, her eyes closed after that."

His eyes mist as he states, "I didn't go to the *shamshaan* when they took her. I don't like deaths. Even when Kishore and Anoop died, I refused to go and see them. I only wanted to preserve their happy memories."

He closes his eyes as memories overwhelm him. Then, smiling sadly, he adds, "So many things have happened in my life. I can't recall even half of them. Blame my old age."

I want to know about his colourful life and he retorts, "You mean women?" I nod. And he shoots back, "I didn't have as many affairs as were insinuated. There were just five or six women in my life. But I'm not going to tell you their names. It would be very ungentlemanly to kiss and tell. Would you like it if someone did that to you?"

Oh, oh. I mention Nalini Jaywant's name and he refuses to comment on his relationship with her. All he says is, "She lives nearby. She's a recluse. She doesn't meet anyone. Not even me. I don't know what's happening to her."

Memories return haltingly. He talks of the super-hit *Kismet* which ran for an

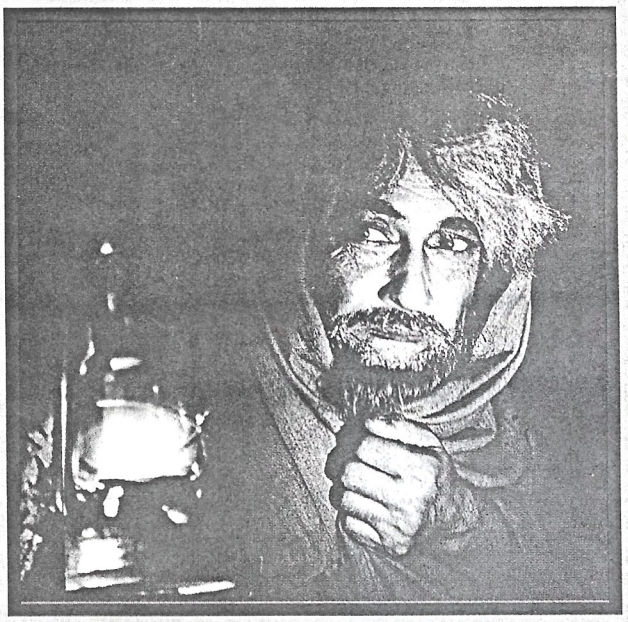
unprecendented 187 weeks.

Explaining the genesis of the movie, he says, "A friend from Hollywood sent us a book, *Screenplay Writing* by Francis Marian. The book opened our eyes to a far more complex world of film-making. It vividly explained how to write a scene, how to establish the characters. *Kismet* was full of Francis Marian's influence."

But after *Kismet*, the Bombay Talkies team (Himanshu Rai, Devika Rani, Gyan Mukherji, Shashadhar Mukherjee and Ashok Kumar) disintegrated. Himanshu Rai died. Devika Rani took over. Dadamoni recalls, "But she started playing politics. She brought in another director, Amiya Chakravarthy, in place of Gyan Mukherji. This hurt us. So we left Bombay Talkies."

Ashok Kumar then made *Eight Days, Chal Chal Re Naujawan, Begum, Shikari, Humayun* and *Saajan* for Filmistan studio. He returned to Bombay Talkies as its proprietor in 1957. "Devika Rani had left by then," he states. "But Bombay Talkies had fallen on bad days. The debts amounted to Rs 28 lakhs. We made movies like *Majboor, Ziddi, Mahal* and *Mashaal* to repay the debts."

He remembers spotting a young boy taking notes on the sets of *Mashaal*. He smiles, "Bombay Talkies had strict rules. Outsiders weren't allowed on the sets. So I was curious when I saw this boy for three-four days continuously. Director Nitin Bose told me that the boy was his nephew who'd come to watch us shoot. Three years later he made his first film and hit the international scene. He was Satyajit Ray and the film was *Pather Panchali*. So in a way Satyajit was the product of Bombay Talkies too."



Certain memories rankle even today. He points out, "Bimal Roy was making *Parineeta* for me. But he went ahead and launched *Do Bigha Zameen*. I was upset but I kept quiet. One day he told me that he wanted to shoot certain scenes of *Parineeta* in Calcutta. Though I couldn't see much sense in that, I allowed him to go.

"Later I realised that he'd shot the entire *Do Bigha Zameen* at my expense. I confronted him and he pacified me by saying that *Parineeta* would be a great film. I told him categorically that *Parineeta* would be released before *Do Bigha Zameen*. He agreed. But he didn't keep his word. He completed *Do Bigha Zameen* and released it before *Parineeta*. I was hurt. I broke off all relations with him."

Bimal Roy shot *Do Bigha Zameen* at my expense. I was hurt

Ashok Kumar later worked with Bimal Roy in *Bandini*. He clarifies, "Nutan had recommended my name. When Bimal Roy approached me, I refused to acknowledge his presence, I asked him to get out of my house. But then everyone started persuading me to work with him. Ultimately I relented and we patched up. But I could never forget that he wronged me. Anyway he's dead. I don't have any ill-feelings towards him today."

Talking takes a toll on him. Ashok Kumar breaks into a bout of coughing. He murmurs, "Talking tires me easily these days. I worked for 65 years. I don't miss those days. Those were my worker days. I earned plenty of money. I've given it all to my son, Arup to distribute it as he wishes among the relatives. He gives me money for my meals. That's all I need these days."

Anuradha Choudhary